

The memory of the Great War still creates a divide. And that's not all: even one hundred years later, the events in July 2014 remain a historiographical problem for scholars. Talking about the outbreak of WW1 with Gian Enrico Rusconi was not only a privilege and honour for us at Telos, it was a unique opportunity to review some of the issues and try to find our way among so many possible interpretations. The chain of events which a month after the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne led to the involvement of all the great powers in Europe was avoidable. However, sometimes it seems that the logic of opposing blocks, and the haste with which the military implemented the plans which had been ready for years, triggered an automatic process, thus narrowing any room for political discretion. So, what really happened in July 1914? Rusconi's perspective reaches beyond the guilt complex and beyond the creeping irrationalism of recent critiques. European powers, particularly the Central Powers, were first and foremost *bad, mindful and informed players* which did not want a European or world war, but *de facto accepted the risk*, thus "making likely what was just possible". Rusconi also highlights another issue we believe is crucial if we want to

understand the July crisis: for both Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, "taking the risk was rational" because both Empires felt the urgency of solving a strategic dilemma, by *striking first, before it was too late*. For the centuries-old Habsburg monarchy, humiliating Serbia meant not only reaping an advantage from stabilising the Balkans, it also meant attacking Slavic nationalism, forcefully protected by Russia, which the Austrians regarded as a threat to the very survival of their empire. From their side, the Germans considered their support to an Austrian attack against Belgrade as a way to test the resilience of the French-Russian Entente and its ability to react from a diplomatic and military point of view. Chancellor Bethmann's priority was to see whether the *threat of a global war* was enough to break the alliance between Paris and St. Petersburg. For both empires, war was a possibility which should have preferably been contained, but not excluded; striking first rather than maintaining peace was their priority. This does not in any way mean that the German war was a defensive one. On the contrary, breaking the Franco-Russian encirclement meant establishing the premises for continental hegemony, not only from the point of view of political balance of powers and the

acquisition of new territories, but also as regards economic and commercial relations. The *Septemberprogramm* was the manifesto of the German hegemony over Europe. It reads: "A Central European economic association is to be constructed through common customs agreements, to comprise France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland and possibly Italy, Sweden and Norway. This association will have no common constitutional supreme authority and will provide for ostensible equality among its members, although it will be in fact under German leadership; it must stabilise Germany's economic predominance in Central Europe." It's not surprising that a new Continental Block lead by Germany was so frightening and prompted Great Britain to enter the war (notwithstanding Belgium's neutrality). And there's no need to bring the repertoire of negative anthropology into this debate in order to understand the enormous strategic dilemma that Italy solved by first declaring neutrality and then by entering the war.

Mariella Palazzolo  @Telosae

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RUSCONI

## JULY 1914: BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE...

“Never had a war been so carefully planned from an operational, logistic and technological point of view. And yet, the war that started in early August was not inevitable, pre-determined and necessary.”

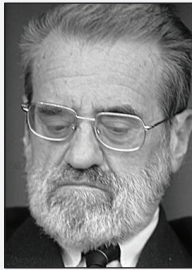
**Telos:** One hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War we're still discussing what triggered it. To what extent can we unilaterally attribute the reason for the war to an individual country, or instead talk of miscalculation by all the players in the field?

**Gian Enrico Rusconi:** I would share the second hypothesis, but each government is responsible to a different extent. Modern historiography falls over itself to talk of an "absurd war" or "the most complex event in contemporary history", one which is extremely difficult to make head or tail of. In fact, historiography readily uses dark irrational tones to describe it. But actually we can learn more by objectively examining the processes and chain of crucial events which led the ruling classes in Europe, and especially the ruling class in Germany, to trigger a conflict which was at the time perceived as inevitable, but which today we see as avoidable or improbable. This doesn't mean singling out a culprit, instead it involves performing a conceptually more demanding and enlightening study focusing on the rationale of all the players involved and the options they considered and discarded. The fundamental category to interpret those events is the *risk of war*, imposed and accepted. Risk logic is what makes likely what was just possible and materialises something which is only virtual.

Obviously, alliances had a big impact on the outcome of the political and diplomatic crisis in July 1914, and so did the strategic and military plans drawn up by France and Germany and the practically irreversible deployment mechanisms. Never had a war been so carefully planned from an operational, logistic and technological point of view.

And yet, the war that started in early August was not inevitable, pre-determined and necessary. It was rashly, yet intentionally triggered by all the governments, even if each in its own way. The decision-makers didn't act like "sleepwalkers" (as we often say today, quoting the title of a book by the historian Christopher Clark), but as bad, mindful and informed players. This definition applies to those countries who imposed their own game (Austria wanted to militarily punish Serbia, and Germany blackmailed Russia to prevent it from siding with Serbia) as well as to those that reacted to it (Russia and France). To understand the moves of each government and their individual degree of responsibility, so to speak, we need to understand *what kind of war* the opening players - Austria, Germany and Russia - had in mind. They were ready for an escalation of a local war (Austria versus Serbia), which later became an Euro-continental war (Germany supported Austria, while Russia sided with Serbia) and then a world war when France joined together with its ally Russia, and then at the last minute Great Britain also took part, officially because the Germans invaded neutral Belgium.

As things stood, Germany played a decisive political role, because it lent its unconditional support to Austria, but above all it played a crucial military role, because it immediately implemented its offensive (effectively attacking the West), sending in more than one million men and invading neutral Belgium. There's no question that the 1914 war was first and foremost a German war, due to the way Germany imposed the logic of the war at its outbreak, as well as the cultural and emotional intensity with which the war was perceived in Germany. Berlin is ultimately responsible for taking the risk of war and for forcing other countries to join. In some ways, it was a calculated risk. Although taking a risk is a rational decision, it doesn't mean you'll be successful.



Gian Enrico Rusconi is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at Turin University. He was also *Gastprofessor* at the *Freie Universität* in Berlin and Director of the Italo-German Historical Institute in Trento between 2005 and 2010. An expert connoisseur of German history and society, in 1997 he won the *Goethe-Medaille* awarded by the German Goethe Institutes to foreign scholars who have contributed to enhancing cultural exchange between Germany and the rest of the world. He has dedicated some of his most important publications to the outbreak of the First World War: *Rischio 1914. Come si decide una guerra* (Il Mulino, 1984); *L'azzardo del 1915. Come l'Italia decide la sua guerra* (Il Mulino, 2005); *1914: attacco a Occidente* (Rizzoli, 2014). His publications about German history, often compared to Italian history, include: *La crisi di Weimar* (Einaudi, 1977); *Germania, Italia, Europa* (Einaudi, 2003); *Parallele Geschichte? Italien und Deutschland 1945-2000* (Duncker&Humblot, 2006); *Berlino - la reinvenzione della Germania* (Laterza, 2009); *Cavour e Bismarck - due leader fra liberalismo e cesarismo* (Il Mulino, 2011). Rusconi has tackled the issue of national identity in *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione* (Il Mulino, 1993), and the relationship between religion and secularism in *Come se Dio non ci fosse: i laici, i cattolici e la democrazia* (Einaudi, 2000) and *Non abusare di Dio: per un'etica laica* (Rizzoli, 2007). Rusconi, aged 76 and married, was born in Meda (Monza and Brianza).

The objectives formulated by the German government after the war had started show that Germany's plan included a massive economic and commercial expansion at the expense of its main continental competitors. Do you believe there's a link between Germany's economic hegemony and the failure of the balance of powers in Europe?

Yes, this link exists. But the main reasons for the war are exclusively political and military. What their adversaries called an "assault on world power", the Germans perceived as their attempt to break the *geo-strategic* encirclement they felt others had imposed on them. In actual fact, this meant re-adjusting the balance of power in Europe and, therefore, indirectly, in the world. Several English historians, with their typical provocative approach, sarcastically state that had Germany won WW1 it would have created an *ante litteram* European Union, led by Germany, which would have been compatible with Britain's interests and would have anticipated history by a few decades. Based on these considerations, some believe that Great Britain went against its own interests by entering the war on the continent in 1914. Apart from the provocative tone, this is a stupid and antihistorical idea because in any case, Germany would have established a rather illiberal form of hegemony, though not totalitarian. Just take a look at the *Septemberprogramm* written in 1914 by the German Chancellor Bethmann, when the Germans looked set to win in France; it proves that Germany's plans were incompatible with British interests. I think the document is sufficiently clear and shows just how ambitious the Germans were; it is fair to talk about a hegemonic will, even by a moderate like Bethmann.

You emphasised the fact that when war broke out German intellectuals considered it as the ultimate outcome of a clash between irreconcilable cultural identities, the German one and the Western one. Did Kant's homeland really represent an alternative cultural identity compared to the West?

In 1914 Kant was not on the map, nor were any of the great German classics we admire. The cultural climate has changed radically. It's no accident that the war explicitly pits "the ideas of 1914" against "those of 1789". It was a German war, among others, because that's how the German people saw it, encouraged by all their professors and intellectuals. The Germans talk openly about *Kulturkrieg*: this emotional and cultural investment immediately turned the war into an inter-west clash of civilisations, one which was to change world history. After the initial surprise, all German intellectuals, especially academic intellectuals, were quickly and totally convinced of the need to support the government. When war was declared their enthusiasm sparked a virulent comeback of negative prejudices *vis-à-vis* enemy countries, against which they juxtaposed their own ethnic-national values, inspired by the sense of a community overcoming class differences; this is what triggered the unconditional and unanimous support for the war. *Kultur* was the glue and the synthesis of all this. The intellectuals who signed the *Appeal to the Civilised World* in October 1914 deny any contrast between Goethe's and Kant's Germany and the country led by the Kaiser. This spiritual deployment, this sort of reinvented German identity played a major role in supporting the initial euphoria, and then the patriotic acceptance of the war by the middle classes.

Should Italy's position in 1914-15 be considered as a betrayal? And how did its gradual shift from its alliance with the Central Powers, to a state of neutrality, and finally its intervention with the Triple Entente affect the outcome of the war?

Proclaiming itself neutral was a legitimate decision by the Italian government, because the nature of the alliance it had signed decades earlier with the Central Powers was and had to remain a defensive alliance. Moreover, Rome had been intentionally and maliciously kept in the dark by both Vienna and Berlin during the contacts and communications which took place in July of that year. How could the Italian ally honour its commitment to intervene if it wasn't consulted but just faced with the *fait accompli* of a war? It's true that the military agreements Italy signed with Germany (secret, but approved by the government) were extremely demanding. In fact, in the case of a war on the continent Italy was meant to send an army to the Rhine to fight as allies with the Germans. The commitment wasn't just a paper deal: the Italian Army General Staff had drawn up detailed plans regarding this possibility. When European armies began to deploy, General Cadorna ordered the Italian units to deploy according to these plans since he expected to fight the French! He dutifully informed the King and received a generically positive reply. But then, unexpectedly, Rome sent a new order not to proceed. This sounds incredible.

Anyway, Italy's decision not to take part in the war at the outset had an enormous impact on the way it evolved. This fact is acknowledged by military historiography. Instead official international historiography continues to consider Italy as a marginal player. This is a historical mistake. If Italy had "loyally stood by" Germany and Austria in August 1914, this would have given them an enormous advantage during the initial battle. They might even have won it. Something similar could be said for Italy's intervention in 1915. An esteemed German historian wrote: "If Italy had not entered the war in Europe, it might have ended in a tie". This (counterfactual) consideration confirms that the Italy factor was anything but insignificant in both the initial trend and final outcome of the Great War.